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Old Report Carries Familiar Themes

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Despite a Soviet record of trickery, distortion and intransigence, the risks of nuclear war require a massive American effort to reach an arms control agreement with the Kremlin, warned a secret government report.

The admonition wasn't sounded last week, last year or even a decade ago.

It was prepared in January 1953 by then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson for Dwight D. Eisenhower, the new president.

The problems and the recommendations contained in the report _ portions of which have been released in the Harvard quarterly International Security _ have a contemporary ring.

"Flexibility _ freedom of action _ seems to us, indeed, to be the first basic requirement for American policy in the present situation," the Acheson report said.

"It would be very easy for this nation, in the face of the double dangers of Soviet totalitarianism and atomic war, to let events develop so that in the end a catastrophe of some sort becomes unavoidable."

At the time Acheson had the report prepared, the Cold War was straining U.S.-Soviet relations. The United States held a commanding lead in atomic weapons, but the Soviets had tested two of three bombs.

The nuclear arms race was on.

The secretary wanted to pass some advice on the nuclear issue to Eisenhower, so in April 1952 he asked a panel to study the matter. It was headed by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Princeton physicist advising the Atomic Energy Commission. Other members included Vannevar Bush of the Carnegie Institution; John S. Dickey and Joseph Johnson, ex-State Department disarmament specialists; and Allen Dulles, who was to direct the Central Intelligence Agency.

Their report was circulated within the government but withheld from the public. A slightly sanitized version was released recently to an assistant to McGeorge Bundy, a former U.S. national security adviser, and it now appears in the Harvard quarterly.

"The general record of the Soviet Union in diplomacy is one in which the meaning of words has been distorted, the privacy of discussions violated, and trust repaid by trickery," the 1953 report said.

The Iron Curtain was "blocking any real discussion of arms control" since there can be no confidence in any agreement if there is not some way of finding out at least in general terms whether it is being kept, the report charged. The same problem, called verification, shadows the current arms talks in Geneva, where the United States and the Soviet Union are attempting to negotiate an agreement on strategic arms levels.